

USSR

Zviad Konstantinovich GAMSAKHURDIYA
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President, Republic of Georgia (since May 1991)

An avowed nationalist and former political prisoner, Zviad Gamsakhurdiya is spearheading the Soviet republic of Georgia's drive for independence. The most popular political figure in the republic, Gamsakhurdiya was elected President last May, in Georgia's first direct election for republic President; he had served as interim President since April. The presidency provides Gamsakhurdiya with far-ranging powers, including the right to veto legislation passed by the republic legislature. At a press conference shortly after his election, Gamsakhurdiya declared that his first priorities included ensuring Georgia's independence; establishing closer contacts with the six republics that did not sign the 23 April nine-plus-one agreement; seeking international recognition of Georgia as an independent state; and strengthening relations with Western countries.

The son of Konstantin Gamsakhurdiya--one of Georgia's most beloved modern novelists--Zviad Gamsakhurdiya was born in 1939. He graduated from Tbilisi State University and began his career as a senior scientific staffer at the Institute of Georgian Literature. Considered by many Georgian nationalists to be--along with the late Merab Kostava--a godfather of Georgian nationalism, Gamsakhurdiya first became involved in the Georgian dissident movement in the 1950s, when he was arrested at the age of 17 and received a five-year sentence (suspended) for anti-Soviet speeches. During the 1960s and 70s he continued to partake in nationalist activities, resulting in his being detained by the police on numerous occasions, dismissed from his job, and expelled from the Georgian Writers Union. In 1976 he helped establish the Georgian Helsinki Group. His arrest and subsequent public recantation three years later made him suspect among many Georgian nationalists, but Gamsakhurdiya insists that he softened his position "for the sake of the nationalist movement."

In the late 1980s, Gamsakhurdiya once again emerged as a key figure in the Georgian dissident community: following the 9 April 1989 attack by Soviet soldiers on Georgian demonstrators in Tbilisi, Gamsakhurdiya was arrested and detained for 40 days for organizing the demonstrations. Prior to his appointment as interim President, Gamsakhurdiya had been serving as Chairman of the Georgian Supreme Soviet, a post to which he was elected last November after leading his Round Table coalition to an overwhelming victory in the republic parliamentary elections.

Gamsakhurdiya is married and has three sons. A philologist, he is a specialist in American poetry and cites Robert Frost as a favorite. Gamsakhurdiya has published several books of poetry and fables. He speaks German, French, and impeccable English.

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